CHAPTER I

Beginnings

Bones found in a cave in County Waterford in 1928 indicate that the first Irishmen may have died before 9000 BC. But the evidence is unreliable, and in any case they would not have survived the last cold cycle of the Ice Age around 7000 BC. The first significant human habitation dates from the middle of the seventh millennium BC. In the previous twenty-five thousand years a variety of animal life had flourished, notably the giant Irish elk with antlers spanning up to 10 feet; great hairy mammoths, hyenas, wolves and foxes. As temperatures changed, Ireland variously experienced tropical forests, tundra and open vegetation. The landscape had been formed earlier still. The Mourne Mountains and other famous landforms were created some 75 million years ago as molten lava cooled. Drumlins and deep valleys such as the Gap of Dunloe were sculpted and gouged by the gigantic force of ice two hundred thousand years ago.

About nine thousand years ago, as the world's warming climate melted the ice cover, sea levels rose, and Ireland lost its land link with Britain and became an island on the north-western corner of the European continental shelf, separated from her neighbours by shallow seas. A fall of 350 feet (106 metres) in sea level would once again connect south-east Ireland to Wales, while a fall of about 600 feet (182 metres) would lay bare the sea floor to France as well as the continental shelf 150 miles out into the Atlantic, west of the provinces of Munster and Connaught. Britain retained her land connections with the European mainland across the southern reaches of the North Sea to Belgium, the Netherlands and north-western Germany far longer. This explains why Britain, unlike Ireland, has snakes: by the time they reached western Britain after the Ice Age, Ireland was already an island

(although legend has it instead that Saint Patrick, Ireland's patron saint, banished the reptiles).

However, before the rising sea submerged these land bridges, the first humans to settle in the British Isles trekked across them, probably from Scotland. When these too had been submerged, around 6700 BC, Ireland was left alone facing the Atlantic. These first settlers found a country whose principal geographical characteristics had been formed. Of its 20 million acres (about 8.1 million hectares), an eighth were hills and mountains with inhospitable rocks bared by ice, wind and rain. Much of the rest was wooded, but by 3000 BC another eighth had become bog as trees and other vegetation collapsed into lakes and streams. Not until the twentieth century had the remaining 15 million acres, most of it good productive land, been adequately exploited by improving agricultural efficiency and afforestation policies. But eight and a half thousand years ago, before mass human habitation, Ireland like Britain was covered by dense deciduous forests, with lakes, mountains, streams and rivers only breaking the cover. Thus was provided the habitat for animal life and food and shelter for the first Irishmen.

The first communities were composed of Mesolithic (middle Stone Age) people. There are conflicting opinions about their origins and first settlements. They did not live by farming, but instead gathered plants, leaves and grasses and hunted wildlife. For the most part, they seem to have lived by the sea or beside lakes or rivers. It is likely that they undertook sea voyages, but in very primitive craft, probably skin-clad coracles similar to those that survive to the present day in the west. This primitive economy lasted undisturbed for over two thousand years until knowledge of domestication of animals and plants arrived in Ireland during the fourth millennium BC. Even then, Mesolithic ways of life continued for perhaps two thousand years after the first farmers began to settle in the country.

Little is known of Mesolithic man in Ireland. No Mesolithic tombs (one of the principal sources of evidence for archaeologists) have been discovered, and significant traces of only one Mesolithic community have been found, at Mount Sandel in co. Londonderry, where excavations have revealed the postholes of round huts, approximately 20 feet (6 metres) across, with central hearths and associated pits. The Mount Sandel site is likely to have been a winter residence, more substantial

than those used at other times of the year. The other main source of information about these people comes from the large number of their rubbish dumps that have been found. They contain the remnants of seafood – molluscs, crustaceans and fish – birds and sometimes mammals, together with flint and stone implements and chippings produced in the course of tool making. There is no direct evidence of the linguistic and religious culture, let alone the ethnic composition of these Irishmen. But what these excavations do make clear is that from about 3500 BC Neolithic (late Stone Age) farmers began to arrive and to assimilate the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers.

In comparison to Mesolithic settlers, Neolithic farmers were sophisticated and technically advanced. They also made a major impact on the natural landscape, clearing large tracts of land, using polished stone tools to till and plant the soil. Herds of sheep and cattle were kept, and Neolithic communities penetrated far inland. Their agricultural way of life and domestication of animals complemented the coastal fishing and hunting economy of their Mesolithic predecessors, and this is the probable reason why both ways of life coexisted for so long.

The Neolithic settlers in Ireland originated in the Middle East from where they were gradually forced to emigrate as the expanding population in their homelands increased the pressure to seek new farming lands. By about 5000 BC they had moved through the Balkans, pushing along the Mediterranean coast into France and Spain, and then northwards to the Low Countries and Britain. Bringing their own crops and livestock, they probably sailed in coracles to Ireland across the sea from Spain, Portugal and Brittany. The evidence is unclear, but they may have also introduced the art of pottery, decorating and shaping pots with round bottoms for storing food, and heavier flat bottoms for cooking.

The most impressive Neolithic settlement in Ireland so far discovered was at Lough Gur on the Knockadoon Peninsula, about 12 miles (20 km) south of Limerick city. Excavations mainly in the 1930s and 1940s revealed the domestic structures of an early Irish farming community. Houses were built with stone foundations; some houses were round, some rectangular, their wooden frame walls filled with turves. Their builders used polished stone axes with wooden handles and picks made from the antlers of deer. Bones were shaped into needles,

awls and other domestic implements for spinning wool and making clothing and material for warmth. Flint arrow- and spearheads clearly indicate that the new settlers hunted as well as farmed. Bone and stone bead bracelets and ornaments demonstrate that they were probably as interested in their appearance as we are today. They even set up stone-axe factories, but the most striking remains of the Neolithic farmers are the massive stone megaliths and dolmens they raised over their dead.

There are several different types of Neolithic burial site in Ireland, suggesting that these settlers arrived from several different places and in successive waves. There is some evidence that the first Neolithic mortuary monuments may have been constructed of timber, only to be superseded by those of stone construction. Whether of stone or wood, these monuments all consisted of a central chamber or gallery, covered with earth to form a mound. The earliest stone tombs, dating from around 3000 BC, are reckoned to be those known as 'court cairns', whose predominance in the northern half of the country suggests that a particular Neolithic immigrant group was associated with them. These buildings are characterised by a long, straight-sided stone gallery with a stone-slab roof covered with earth, incorporating an open court – sometimes in the middle of the gallery but more often at one end. The tombs were collective, with the dead, sometimes cremated, sometimes buried, being interred in the galleries with personal artefacts, thus indicating belief in an afterlife. The court was apparently used for burial and doubtless for religious rites.

Tombs of other traditions also abound. Passage graves are especially numerous in the north and east, forming some of the most spectacular examples of Stone Age architecture. These graves are usually found grouped in hilltop cemeteries, with a stone passage leading to a burial chamber, all covered by an earth cairn. The earliest date from about 2800 BC and the leading example of a passage grave site, and one of the most significant in western Europe, is on the river Boyne, at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, near Drogheda, co. Meath, dating from about 2500 BC. Here, as with other passage graves, the stone walls of the burial chamber are decorated with elaborate spiral, zigzag and meandering carvings. The dead were cremated and, as with those of the court cairn people, were placed in the chamber together with pottery, beads and tools. At Newgrange, the extent and intricacy of

the carvings suggest that some of the patterns may have had a religious significance, possibly even depicting highly stylised human faces and figures. Newgrange was designed by its builders so that the sun could enter the chamber only once a year, around midwinter day, suggesting that the passage grave people may have had a knowledge of astronomy and involved the sun in their worship.

The existence of passage graves and similar artwork outside Ireland – notably in Brittany and the Iberian peninsula – supports the observation that these settlers belonged to a group of seaborne immigrants enjoying ancestral traditions and connections with the developing urban civilisations of the Mediterranean. More than this, from the size and positioning of passage grave sites, archaeologists have been able to suggest something of the society of their constructors. While the graves are grouped in cemeteries and used communally, the larger ones seem to have been the repositories of chieftains and their families, with smaller graves being grouped around them: evidence of a hierarchical social order preserved in death.

Another type of chambered tomb, dolmens, built during the Neolithic era, probably derived from the court cairn people. They were single-chamber tombs, with standing stones supporting a large capstone ('dolmen' in Breton; there are many in Brittany) that was then covered with earth to form a mound. Concentrated in the north and east, they tend to be further inland than court and passage graves, suggesting that their builders had penetrated woodland more deeply, and were thus later than the court grave and passage grave peoples. Some capstones weigh perhaps 100 tons: stark testimony to the ingenuity and engineering ability of these Stone Age people.

The fourth type of tomb, and broadly a later one, is the wedge form consisting of a single main chamber whose walls and ceiling are formed of stone slabs in a rectangular layout, narrowed at one end to produce a wedgelike effect. Almost forty have been found, predominantly in the south-west, often close to metal deposits, indicating that they were raised by Bronze Age rather than Neolithic people. It may well be that the wedge tomb builders were among the first groups in Ireland to use metal, and that their farming economy was more dependent upon cattle and grazing than their Neolithic predecessors', since these graves are usually found on light, well-drained soil. The dead, cremated or, if whole, in a crouched position, were

placed inside the wedge-stone box along with pots, ornaments or other furnishings. Tombs were dedicated to individuals, not groups, although they are often clustered together.

Metalworking of copper, gold, silver and lead developed in the Near East around 3500 BC, and experimentation with alloys led to the discovery of bronze in the latter part of the third millennium BC. Its toughness made complex casting possible and also gave a harder cutting edge to tools and weapons. In the period before 2000 BC new migrations swept Europe, ultimately reaching the British Isles.

The folk that brought the Bronze Age to Ireland are known as the Beaker people from their distinctive pots, and probably came from Britain to the north and east of Ireland around the end of the third millennium. As with the Neolithic immigrants, it seems that they supplemented rather than supplanted the Stone Age peoples of the country: the continuation of large stone (megalithic) graves after their arrival suggests this, as does a continuation in the agricultural patterns of life. Their burial practices were not so elaborate as those of the Neolithic farmers, although they often used the same sites. They employed cist-like graves, often grouped in cemeteries, usually scooped into the flat earth. Little evidence remains of how Bronze Age people in Ireland lived, although we know more about them than their Neolithic and Mesolithic precursors. While their burials employed stone, their dwellings were less permanent, usually constructed of wood and earth. But in Lough Gara, on the borders of counties Sligo and Roscommon, draining revealed a concentration of lake island buildings – crannogs – dating from the Bronze Age, on artificial islands built in or near the lake edge, which formed platforms for wooden buildings surrounded by a defensive wooden fence. Crannogs were built from these early days – indeed, there is some evidence of their presence in Neolithic times – and were lived in right into the seventeenth century AD.

Stone circles also date predominantly from the Bronze Age, which lasted in Ireland until around 700 BC. While no circles compare with Stonehenge in England, or are as extensive as the stone works at Carnac in Brittany, a number are monumental in scale. At Grange, near Lough Gur, co. Limerick, for example, there is a stone circle surrounded by a massive outer bank and a standing stone ring of 150 feet (45 metres) across. These circles probably varied in purpose, some

being for religious and ritualistic use, others perhaps to facilitate astronomical measurements. Single standing stones were also first erected during the Bronze Age, sometimes to dignify graves and sometimes perhaps as boundary markers. Such stones continued to be erected into the early Christian era some thirteen hundred years later, many being 'converted' to Christian use by engraved crosses and ogham inscriptions.

Ogham was the first written form of Irish, dating from a very early period of Christianity. Its letters, based on the Roman alphabet, are represented by lines, up to five in number, set at various angles on either side of a stemline. Frequently found in southern Ireland, ogham stones are rare elsewhere (see Figure 1). Those that have survived usually tell us the name of a person followed by that of an ancestor; the script was used for epitaphs and memorials. But before the arrival of Christianity, the Celts came to Ireland, providing the nation's basic gene pool to the present day.

Archaeologists debate what 'Celt' means, some arguing that typical Celtic Iron Age remains (about 800–50 BC in Europe) as found in central Europe are rare in Ireland and that a 'proto-Celtic' group, rooted in the earlier Bronze Age (about 2900–700 BC) Beaker culture, absorbed Celtic attributes, and that this – rather than a mass migration – was what Celticised the people of Ireland. Others argue with perhaps better evidence that the Celts originated along Europe's Atlantic coast during the Bronze Age. Giraldus Cambrensis, writing in 1189 about the Irish, held it was 'the territory of the Basques from which the Irish originally came'. Genetic studies have established that he was correct: Irish and Welsh Celts today come from a common stock with the Basques.

GAELS

More is known about the Celts than about any other European prehistoric people outside Greece and Italy. They had (and have) a markedly high proportion of O-type blood and a predisposition to cystic fibrosis (indeed, Ireland today has, relative to population, the highest incidence of cystic fibrosis in the world, one person in every nineteen carrying the recessive gene). In Ireland alone, the archaeological evidence is vast: over 30,000 Celtic ring forts and sites can still

Figure 1 Ogham stone
There are about four hundred stones carved with Ogham script – a series of lines and notches – mostly in Old Irish, concentrated in south-eastern Ireland. There are also stones in Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man, and south-eastern England. Wood was probably used as well for inscriptions, which commemorate people. The script may have developed in the first century BC, but the stones date from between the fourth and eighth centuries AD and may have marked boundaries and land ownership. Ogham was used by Gaelic scholars as recently as the eighteenth century to convey the rules of poetry and grammar.

be seen. Greek and Roman sources give us vivid descriptions of ancient Celtic society. The Celts themselves mostly transmitted knowledge orally, so not until the advent of Christianity in Ireland, which brought with it the skill of writing, did Celtic Irishmen – the Gaels – transcribe their tales and sagas, laws and annals. Through these and classical records, however, a detailed picture of Iron Age life is available.

The Celts probably came from the lands around the Caspian Sea from which they emigrated south, east and west. Sociologists and linguists have detected important similarities between Celtic language, laws, customs and religion and those of Hindu civilisation. Two Celtic groups populated the British Isles, the Gaels and the Brythoni. The Brythoni settled in what is now Britain; the Gaels occupied Ireland and some of Scotland. The Gaelic language, related to Gaulish, was the direct forebear of the Irish language today.

Exactly when the Celts arrived is not clear, but by 500 BC they seem to have made Ireland a completely Celtic country. They brought with them the Iron Age culture (see Figure 2). Iron was stronger than bronze, and iron ploughs dug deeper and lasted longer. The Bronze Age settlers were always quick to adopt new metallurgical discoveries, and thus no clear break between the two cultures can be determined.

The first recorded mention of the Celts, in the sixth century BC, places them in France and Spain. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BC, described them as one of two western European peoples living along the Danube and in the Pyrenees. Because the Celts came to live on the periphery of Europe, particularly in Ireland, they avoided assimilation into the Roman Empire and the later turmoil of the Hunnish, Gothic and Vandal invasions of the Dark Ages. Consequently, two special features characterise the Irish Celtic heritage. First, more of its artefacts survive than for any other Celtic group. Second, its language and culture survived right up to modern times, remaining widespread to the end of the nineteenth century. Gaelic and Euskara (the language of Basques) are, in fact, the oldest living vernaculars in the West. And since oral tradition was a strong element in this culture, a continuous Irish historical consciousness endured. It took the famines of the 1840s and 1850s, together with emigration and English-language educational policies, to bring the general use of the Irish language to an end.

Figure 2 Celtic gold: the Broighter Boat
Part of the Iron Age first-century-BC Broighter Hoard discovered in 1896 in a field near Lough Foyle, co. Londonderry. The boat is unique, measuring 7.25 inches x 3 inches (18.4 cm x 7.6 cm) and weighing 3 ounces (85 g). It has finely wrought benches, rowlocks, two rows of nine oars, a steering oar, grappling tools, three forked implements, a yardarm and a spear. It was most probably part of a religious offering to a Celtic god and, as such, belonged to the finder. However, in 1903 the UK government, represented in court by Sir Edward Carson, successfully sued for ownership of the Hoard on the grounds that it was not religious but was treasure trove and so belonged to the Crown. It is now in the National Museum, Dublin.

The earliest written evidence of Ireland and its people can be dated from the ninth century BC when Homer in *The Iliad* described the north-west of Europe as 'A land of fog and gloom . . . Beyond it is the Sea of Death, where Hell begins.' About four hundred years later a